

September 11, 2009

<http://detnews.com/article/20090911/POLITICS02/909110388>



Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn, left, and Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., talk prior to President Barack Obama's health care address to Congress on Wednesday, during which Dingell got a standing ovation. (Mark Wilson / Getty Images)

## Down for the count, Dingell proves resilient

*DEB PRICE*

*Detroit News Washington Bureau*

**Washington --** A crowd formed around Rep. John Dingell on the floor of the House in June after controversial climate change legislation passed by a slim margin.

Lawmakers were congratulating the Dearborn Democrat on the role he played in moderating and building support for a "cap-and-trade" bill whose chances of passing the House were faltering because many members found it too radical and businesses feared its cost.

"Good work, John," said one after another, several giving him a thumbs up. Dingell's colleague, Rep. Dale Kildee, watched the moment unfold and later said it illustrated how thoroughly Dingell has rebounded since a humbling loss last November in an intra-party feud.

Dingell was ousted from his leadership post on the Energy and Commerce Committee by Rep. Henry Waxman, but Democratic leaders still sought to use his legislative skills to rustle up support for a bill pushed by Waxman. Dingell's sway with sportsmen and other fence-sitters was critical as the bill's chances of passing the House faltered.

Dingell's skills and influence likely will be needed once again as President Barack Obama pushes his signature initiative: health care reform.

Obama lauded Dingell in his speech to Congress on Wednesday night for introducing health care reform legislation every year he's been in office, taking up the mantle of his congressman father, John Sr., who first proposed reform in 1943. John Jr. was instrumental in developing H.R. 3200, the reform bill in the House that will be a challenge for supporters to pass.

That's a challenge the 83-year-old congressman is ready to take on, judging from a BlackBerry message he typed to an aide after the nationally televised acclamation by Obama: "Dad is smiling down on us right now. He started the fight for universal coverage and we will finish it this year."

Obama and House leaders probably can't succeed in the health care showdown in Washington without Dingell's skill at coaxing jittery lawmakers into yes votes.

Even outside Washington, convincing reform opponents has been difficult. Debate over health care reform turned explosive in town halls hosted by lawmakers over the August recess, including one by Dingell in Romulus, where he was heckled by skeptics.

Nearly a year since his ouster as chairman, Dingell's influence can still be felt throughout Washington, most significantly for Michigan in his efforts to help stabilize the auto industry through low-interest bridge loans and grants to develop advanced batteries and retool factories to build greener vehicles.

Dingell's resurgence has convinced even liberal detractors that he's too valuable to sideline.

"There is no question John changed votes," Kildee, D-Flint, said of the legislation that passed 219-212. "The vote was so close, and I can't see how it would have passed had he not worked so hard to get votes."

Dingell easily could have faded into the woodwork, said David Cole, head of the Center for Automotive Research.

"The easy way out (after losing the chairmanship race) for somebody his age would be just to bag it, and say it's time to go," Cole said. "But he saw he had a role to play and he played it superbly."

How did Dingell rebound? "Trade secrets," he replies with a hearty chuckle.

Those secrets explain how the Dean of the House has used more than five decades of political talent and connections, legislative skills and friendships to get back up after his defeat and create a revitalized influential role.

Dingell's "clout has only grown" since he was deposed by liberal Waxman, a California Democrat, said Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee.

"He's sitting in the catbird seat. If Pelosi wants to move legislation, she needs him," said Stupak, pointing out how Dingell helped secure make-or-break votes to push ahead Democratic energy and health care bills from moderate lawmakers concerned about the potential impact on farmers, sportsmen and the deficit.

## **'Masterful legislator'**

Pelosi, who officially was neutral in the Dingell-Waxman chairman race but was widely believed to favor Waxman, says Dingell has been "absolutely essential" and "indispensible" this year.

"John Dingell is a masterful legislator," Pelosi said. "The Democratic Caucus, and indeed the entire Congress, continue to rely on his expertise."

Said Rep. Candice Miller, R-Harrison Township: "He stands his ground like a big old tree. He's passionate about what he cares about."

Dingell's rebound relied on applying some of the lessons of "Pop," Dingell's FDR-era congressman father, who died in 1955, paving the way for his son to follow him into the House.

"My daddy used to say you have to eat crow fairly regularly in this business. And he was right. And he also said when you did it, you had to smile," Dingell said. "I'm a lucky guy, and I've been through a lot of this before. I've got plenty of scar tissue."

Shortly after his setback, Dingell and Waxman agreed that in his new "chairman emeritus" role he would take the lead on health care, one of Obama's priorities.

And while crow wasn't on the menu, shortly after the closely contested race, John and Debbie Dingell had dinner with Henry and Janet Waxman. The Dingells were sending a loud message to political Washington: No feud here; they had moved on to the next era of Dingell's political career.

Following serious knee surgery, crutches and a cranberry-colored electric scooter enabled him to keep up with the brisk back-and-forth between the office, hearings and House floor. Seldom missing votes also ensured that he could always be found in his favorite seat on the House floor.

## **Skills came in handy**

"There's an old saying in Washington," Kildee said of the gentle arm-twisting Dingell did from that chair. "There is only one way to pass a bill and a 1,000 ways to kill it. John has policy and political skills that no one else has to pass bills."

Those skills came in handy when the "cash for clunkers" rebate program was running out of money. Deal-hungry car buyers had whipped through nearly all of the initial \$1 billion set aside for the rebate program and weary House lawmakers were headed home the next day for a month-long recess.

Dingell would have to use his political mastery to convince enough of them to expand the program and save thousands of car sales that were in jeopardy.

Fearing the program would die despite the surge in consumer demand for autos, he had to quickly get Democratic leaders to agree new money was needed, huddling with Pelosi, Appropriations Chairman David Obey and other key party allies.

Once he had their support, he turned to the phones, calling Republicans and Democrats in the Michigan delegation, members of the president's auto task force, the Treasury Department and the White House to build the kind of coalition he'd need to pass a bill at an astonishing pace for Congress.

By early morning, a \$2 billion program expansion bill he'd helped write was ready, and the House passed it, 316-109, just five hours later.

## **Examples of influence**

House lawmakers and political experts point to many examples of Dingell's influence this year:

- In the battle between automakers and California over higher fuel standards, Dingell helped the White House in creating a deal where both sides agreed to reasonably higher, but nationally standardized mileage standards.
- When the domestic auto industry and suppliers needed more bridge loans, Dingell worked key White House players, underscoring the dangers to the broader economy of failure.
- In the climate change bill, he got language inserted so that money auction of carbon credits is steered directly to the domestic auto industry to retool factories, and \$50 billion was given to them to build greener cars.
- Dingell wrote the basic health care bill that passed three House committees, and worked to calm disputes between liberal and moderate Democrats on the Energy and Commerce Committee, eventually gaining the support of several key members.
- In the wake of outbreaks of deaths tied to tainted foods, he pushed for the House to take up his food safety legislation, which it passed in late July.
- Dingell nudged the Department of Energy to target \$2 billion from the economic recovery package for advanced battery grants.

## Key in health battle

Looking ahead, Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, a liberal health-care advocacy group, says Dingell will be key in the brutal battle over the overhaul of the nation's health care system.

"Congressman Dingell is a practical idealist," said Pollack, pointing out Dingell hasn't allowed his preference for a single-payer health care system to deter him from searching for a bill that can pass and still do some good.

Stephen Hess, a political expert at the Brookings Institution, says of Dingell's resurgence: "One always wonders what will happen when the mighty have fallen. One way or another, it really does show what they are made of. He was always powerful. And what he has done since losing his chairmanship shows the degree to which he really cared about the issues.

"He has rewritten his image and his place. And an age when that's pretty rare. It's quite a story."

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## Additional Facts

In his own words

**Q.** How have you reinvented yourself?

**A.** I am the same Dingell I was last year and the same Dingell as when I came here. Long before I was a chairman, I was an effective member. I've been writing legislation for over 50 years.

**Q.** What levers do you use to stay effective?

**A.** Those are trade secrets. I am not going to tell them. (Big laugh)

**Q.** A lot people would have quit or been vengeful after losing their chairmanship. Why not you?

**A.** What does it do for the people I serve? ... I don't help them by doing that. I'm sent down there to do things that need to be done. And that's what I've been doing.

**Q.** What is satisfying to you about this new role?

**A.** I'm still able to accomplish things. And I'm still able to be effective. And if you look we've taken care of autos in a very real way.

**Q.** Did you have any doubt you would still be effective?

**A.** I never thought I would be ineffective. I learned how to do this job a long time ago, before I ever had any titles in the place. And I am using the same tactics, procedures and operations I did in the old days.

I am not a whiner and I am not a complainer. I don't like to lose. But I have a job that people of the 15th District who I love dearly are paying me to do. I am going to do it the best way I know how.

**Q.** When do you plan to retire?

**A.** (Big laugh) I will announce that at the right time. That is not on the agenda.

**Q.** Are there a few things you are most proud of?

**A.** ... There was a guy in France. He was a very prominent Frenchman. And this was during the (French) Revolution and somebody asked him -- Abbe Sieyes -- they said what did you do during the Revolution? And he said, 'I survived.' (big laugh) ... I am having a lot of fun ... . My daddy used to say you have to eat crow fairly regularly in this business. And he was right. And he also said when you did it you had to smile. I'm a lucky guy and I've been through a lot of this before. I've got plenty of scar tissue. I'm a tough old Polack and I can take this kind of thing.